

# BULLETIN

## Choices of young people at age 16

### Introduction

Young people in this country are faced with a range of options at the end of compulsory schooling. These include the traditional academic 'A' level route, more vocational educational options such as GNVQs and various training schemes, in particular Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships.

Although training options have improved in recent years, both in relation to quality and accreditation available, with wider recognition of vocational qualifications as valid entry to other routes such as higher education, the destinations of young people still tend towards the traditional route of staying on at school or going into further education. The numbers of young people staying on in full-time education have increased significantly throughout the 1990s (DfEE, 1998a). Between 1986 and 1996, the proportion of 16 year olds studying full-time in further or higher education colleges, or state or independent schools rose from under 47 per cent to just over 70 per cent (DfEE, 1997).

The number of young people going directly into employment after compulsory schooling forms a relatively small proportion in comparison with those staying on, although there has been a slight increase in recent years. Increasingly, employers require higher levels of skill and qualification from their employees and place particular emphasis on 'transferable' skills such as communication, customer relations and IT skills, as well as on attitudes and other qualities considered to contribute to 'employability'. The local labour market context can also be influential in the way in which it facilitates and/or constrains the opportunities individuals have for becoming skilled (Bynner and Roberts, 1991).

The nature of careers has also undergone significant transformation. The traditional 'job for life' is no longer the norm in many situations and career paths are more likely to be episodic, sometimes linked by periods of further learning.

This has implications for careers guidance (Law, 1996). The need for high quality guidance and counselling has increasingly been emphasised (DfEE, 1998b) as has that for greater links between the different agencies offering such services at the local level (OECD, 1996).

In the context of recent changes in the labour market and in careers education and guidance offered, it is timely to assess the predominant influences on young people's choices, their perceptions of the information and guidance available to them and of the options on leaving compulsory education.

This Bulletin outlines some of the results of a study undertaken recently in four London boroughs for FOCUS Central London (Pitcher and Green, 1999). It explores the aspirations of young people and their awareness of the options available to them at the end of Year 11.

### The 'Choices' study

The study, undertaken between 1998 and 1999, investigated the changing needs of 16 year-olds and factors influencing their choices, in order to inform provision of guidance for young people and economic development policies of the sponsors. It explored the understanding, expectations and attitudes of young people prior to their finishing compulsory education, in the context of a changing culture of guidance and advice.

The research was undertaken in several stages: initially through a survey of more than 200 young people in four London schools, in their final year of compulsory schooling (i.e. year 11), during which careers guidance normally takes place and decisions about future careers are made<sup>1</sup>. The survey was then supplemented by a small number of face-to-face interviews with careers coordinators and head teachers or other teachers

<sup>1</sup> The survey was undertaken in Autumn 1998.

responsible for Personal and Social Education (PSE) policy in the schools; focus groups with pupils in the schools surveyed; and telephone interviews with careers service advisers and training providers.

### Career aspirations of young people

Students were asked in the survey what route they intended to follow at the end of Year 11. The most popular option was studying for A levels, with 54 per cent of the sample intending to follow this route. Nearly a quarter of respondents expected to study for Advanced GNVQs. Relatively few intended to opt for a Modern Apprenticeship or go straight into employment (9 per cent in each case).

It emerged in the focus groups that the majority of young people saw their immediate route after GCSEs as being further study at sixth form or FE college. While some students had a clear idea of what they wanted to study and sometimes a longer-term view, many were vague about the subjects that they were going to study when they went to college. Some students had unrealistically high expectations, which generally seem to have been tempered by advice from teachers and careers advisers.

For example, Michelle was thinking of going to college because she wanted to be a vet. But "a load of teachers said it's really hard to get. You need to get all As and Bs and stuff like that".

A few young people had known what they wanted to do from an early age and, particularly if the option had been endorsed by others, still intended to pursue that option.

Looking at the different routes overall, seven types of student emerge:

- Those who want to go on to study A levels, who know the subjects they wish to study and in many cases the career they would like to pursue;
- Those who wish to take vocational options at college (for example, GNVQs) and who also have an idea of the

subject area, and in some cases the career that they would like;

- Those who wish to go on to sixth form or FE college, but who do not have a clear idea of the subject areas they would like to study;
- Students who would like to study a course at college part time, while being employed;
- Those who want to take the training in employment route (for example, an apprenticeship);
- Young people who want to leave school and get a job (without necessarily having further training);
- Those who do not know what they want to do.

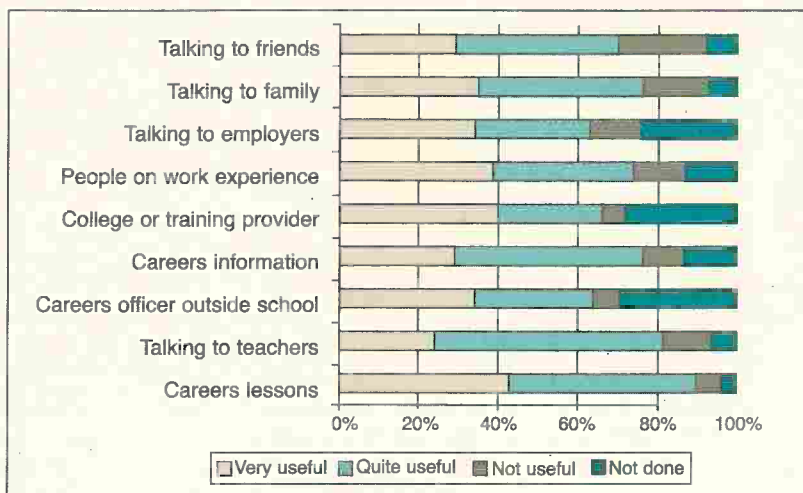
From discussion with careers advisers, it appears that many young people feel that going to college and gaining qualifications is the best way to enhance their job prospects. For some young people, employer-based training such as a Modern Apprenticeship or National Traineeship would be a much more realistic option, but because of the image many still have of this route, they prefer to go to college and perhaps struggle with A levels, possibly then dropping out before their completion. It was estimated in 1993 that around 40-50 per cent of young people starting a full-time college course at age 16 leave early or fail their course (Coles, 1995).

The majority of young people in the *Choices* study knew little about options other than A levels or GNVQs. It was felt by some respondents that there needs to be much more effective marketing and publicity aimed at young people and their parents and also teachers.

### Careers education and guidance

All of the schools in the study had careers guidance and education built into their PSE programmes. A range of materials was also available to young people when considering their future options. Respondents were asked how useful they found different sources in helping them to decide what to do after the end of Year 11. Figure 1 shows the different options and the opinion of respondents on each option. The majority of respondents had received careers lessons at the time of the survey.

Figure 1: Sources of information and the degree to which they were useful





When discussing careers education during PSE in the focus groups, it appeared that the provision and quality of careers education varies significantly according to the school and also the enthusiasm and knowledge of teachers delivering careers education. There was evidence that the careers interview helped young people to focus on their next steps:

*"[The Careers Adviser] asks you questions about what you want to do and if you don't know, she looks up information and gives you advice" .... "she also looks up your grades and stuff, to tell you whether or not you could do it" ... "she sends you action plans as well ... and your parents ... after the interview".*

In all the schools visited, a key issue to emerge was the fact that teachers involved in planning and delivering careers guidance and education to pupils in Year 7 upwards felt themselves to be insufficiently briefed on the different routes available to young people and the relative merits of each option. It is clear that teachers involved in planning of careers education are generally keen to develop their knowledge but experience a problem of constraints on time and resources.

### The value of work experience

Young people in schools generally undertake a period of work experience, sometimes during Year 11 but also earlier than this in some cases. In the study, we consulted school students and careers guidance professionals about the value of work experience. The majority of respondents found that work experience gave a good idea of work. Just over a third stated that it had changed their ideas about what skills were important. There were also opinions that it had helped students to decide what to do after GCSEs, or what not to do.

For example, Adele had considered working with animals prior to doing her work experience: *"I worked in an office in a hospital for animals, 'cause I wanted to work with animals, but I was working in an office, which was a bit boring ... but I don't want to work with animals any more though...".* Adele had two fall-back positions, which were catering or working with children. Tina, however, had wanted to go into medicine and had had a very positive experience in her placement: *"I found it really good there ... I got to meet professors and doctors ... they gave me advice on the medical profession ... and I visited a hospital, they took me to a restaurant on my last day ... every day I had a different routine."*

Work experience tends to be a mix of roles, including observing, filing and other tasks. Its role is to give a brief introduction to a career and observance of the world of work, including issues such as timekeeping, dress code, adapting, using initiative and interpersonal skills.

The value of work experience depends very much on the quality of the placement and the degree to which it relates to a student's intended future career. If the young person has an

idea about the area of work they might want to pursue in the future, it can reinforce decisions or, if they find they do not like it, can help them to make an informed decision not to progress further in that direction. More importantly, it introduces young people to an adult working environment and can be a boost to self-esteem, as well as giving experience of work discipline and employers' expectations.

### Influences on young people

Parents still tend to have a strong influence on young people's choices of future direction, and in many cases have high expectations for their children<sup>2</sup>. In the main, parents still tend to be aware primarily of the traditional academic route and in some cases their expectations that their children will follow this route can constrain young people's options. More vocational routes may often be viewed as 'second-rate' in comparison.

Peers and other family members are also influential in many cases, especially if they have experience of an occupational area or form of study that the young person is considering.

For example, in Marcus' case: *"my cousin ... he did a year in photography and said I could go to college and study to be an electrician ... that influenced me".*

Professionals in careers education and guidance, including teachers and careers advisers, also have a significant role in influencing young people's choices, especially in terms of encouragement to continue with further study if a student is considered likely to achieve the requisite grades.

### Conclusions: implications for policy

#### *Aspirations of young people*

While factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class impact upon the expectations of young people, nonetheless the tendency of Year 11 students in the study was to aspire to further full-time education. The principal aspiration for students was primarily towards A levels, although GNVQs were becoming a popular option for some. The high aspirations which young people tend to have are in some cases unrealistic. The majority of respondents expected to enter a professional, managerial or technical occupation and although some were encouraged to have a 'fallback' position, many did not. Evidence from the study indicates that many young people are still not clear about their future steps at this age and that going into further education may be a means of deferring decisions.

#### *Marketing of vocational options and presentation of information*

Employer-based training options are still seen by many as 'exploitative' and lacking in quality. Greater marketing of vocational options, emphasising the quality and diversity of

<sup>2</sup> Parental expectations may vary according to whether they themselves have followed the further education route.

such routes, is important in changing perceptions. Information needs to be targeted not only at young people but also the key influences on them, including their parents.

The way in which information on the various options is presented is also extremely important. In a rapidly changing world, it is clear that information and marketing materials have a relatively short shelf life. Continuous marketing, particularly of 'non-traditional' options, is necessary if students, their parents and teachers are to make informed choices. Computer and internet-based materials are likely to be more easily updateable and students tend to find this an engaging means of accessing information.

#### *Careers education and guidance*

Structured delivery of careers education from an early age, with the participation both of personnel in schools and careers advisers, helps to ensure awareness of the full range of options, as well as enabling young people to reflect on their possible choices. In order to facilitate delivery of careers education in schools, teachers not only need to be aware of the different options available to young people but often require training to fulfil this role effectively.

One of the principal messages arising from the research is that, although the labour market and potential routes into employment have changed radically, young people are often not aware of the full range of options available to them. In part, this is due to the 'traditional' expectations of many parents, who remain a key influence on young people's choices. There is an opportunity for those involved in careers education and guidance to become more proactive in addressing some of the preconceptions held by young people, particularly those who are less likely to enter the labour market through an academic route.

## References

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### Project Update: major research projects currently underway at IER

Career Paths of 1995 Graduates – a survey of the activities of the 1995 graduating cohort some three and a half years after completing their studies. Funded by DfEE and CSU. Reporting in November 1999.

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Extent, causes and implications of skill deficiencies – a major project to address recruitment problems and skill gaps experienced by employers. IER has an over-arching role in the research consortium undertaking the research, including the design of research instruments for a telephone survey of 30,000 employers, face to face questionnaire survey of 4,000 employers, and approximately 100 case studies of firms in seven sectors. Funded by DfEE. Reporting in April 2000.

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Occupational forecasts and trends in occupational structure – analysis of changing structure of occupations in the UK, together with forecasts to 2010. Reporting in November 1999.

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